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Variations on a Theme: Corruption in Mexico and the U.S.

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Abstract

While widely-cited measures based on expert opinion show significantly higher levels of corruption in Mexico than the U.S., other surveys reflecting public opinion show strikingly much closer results. Such patterns raise questions regarding the underlying meanings and types of corruption that inform these surveys. This paper explores these differences and similarities while highlighting the distinct patterns of corruption found in the two countries. I argue that the opinions of the Mexican and US public emphasize a certain form of corruption and share a broader understanding of the concept, while experts' opinion reflect a narrower approach and understanding of corruption. In the end, the study underscores the serious mismatch between different conceptualizations and types of corruption, on the one hand, and how corruption is measured, on the other.

Key words: Corruption; Mexico; United States; Perceptions; Methodology

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INTRODUCTION

Corruption assumes many different forms, patterns and meanings. While some embrace a narrow definition pointing to rather well-defined rules and laws that seek to limit the self-regarding behavior of public officials (Nye, 1967), others tend to envision a much broader

understanding of corruption rooted largely in the failure of government officials or the system in general to pursue the common good over and above private regarding or special interests (on the definitional debate see, for instance, Philip (1997, 2015), Etzioni (2014), and Johnston (2004). Anthropologists, in fact, largely avoid even defining corruption, seeing its meaning as constructed and contested, preferring instead to focus more on meanings given in the local setting and in practice (Torsello & Venard, 2016, p.37; Haller & Shore, 2005; Muir & Gupta, 2018). Yet despite the concept of corruption being perhaps as broad as the generic word "illness," widely used measures ranking countries by their level of corruption tend to give the impression of being a rather precise thing as if asking which country is more corrupt actually makes sense (Heywood, 2015, p.2). Based on subjective perceptions, these measures, while useful in nurturing ample empirical research, nonetheless fail to differentiate among the vast types, forms, or patterns of corruption, or the many different understandings and meanings of the term.

Transparency International's (TI) widely employed Corruption Perception Index (CPI), for example, shows Mexico (with a score of 30 in 2016 on their 0 [high] to 100 [low corruption] counterintuitive scale and ranking 123rd least corrupt of the 176 countries in the index) marred by excessively high levels of corruption, while its northern neighbor, the U.S. (with a score of 74 and ranking 18th of 176), suffers much lower levels. The two, in short, hardly seem comparable. Surveys from the business community or survey-based rankings on the rule of law reinforce this general assessment (World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report, World Justice Project Rule of Law). Yet surprisingly, both the Mexican and the U.S. public tend to consider their governments, politicians and political parties corrupt. In a 2013 Gallup poll, for instance, 79% of U.S. respondents considered corruption widespread throughout the government, ranking corruption as a major problem (Clifton, 2014).

In a similar manner, in Mexico's 2012 National Poll of Political Culture (ENCUP 2012) 72% of respondents ranked corruption 5 on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). These similarities among the two publics repeat across many national and international polls suggesting that perhaps despite the views of the experts, corruption has become central to the political narrative on both sides of the river (Curry, p.2016).

But we are really talking about (and hence measuring) the same thing? Though grounded in the scholarly debate over how to define corruption, this puzzle centers largely on how those polled actually conceptualize corruption in their own minds. Data from the example above thus raise a series of questions: Why does expert opinion on corruption in the U.S., as reflected in the Corruption Perception Index, seem to vary so widely from the U.S. publics' views, while expert and public views on Mexico seem to align more closely? To what extent do the types meanings of corruption differ between/among: a) the experts, b) the experts and the public, and c) the two populations?

In exploring these questions, this paper tries to show how expert opinion in both countries reflects a rather narrow definition of corruption compared to the two publics. It focuses on a certain type and pattern of political corruption when assessing the level of corruption in the two countries. While the public certainly recognizes the forms of corruption emphasized by the experts, it seems that the Mexican and US publics also share a much broader understanding of the concept of corruption and thus tend to focus and stress in addition other types and forms of corruption. Fundamentally, the analysis shows how despite the explosive growth in scholarly and popular attention to corruption over the past few decades, there remains a serious mismatch between conceptualizations and typologies of corruption on the one hand, and how corruption is measured, on the other.

Organizationally, part one of the paper frames the question by presenting general measures of corruption for the two countries. Discussion then proceeds by focusing on what these differences and similarities among the various groups might teach us with regards to the underlying meanings employed by the survey respondents and the forms or types of corruption found in the two countries. Analysis moves from looking at expert views to the views of the two publics followed by a comparison of expert versus public opinion. I conclude by discussing some implications for the comparative study of corruption.

1. MEASURES OF CORRUPTION: COMPARING MEXICO AND THE U.S.

Since the mid-1990s, a handful of measures have emerged to gauge the level of corruption within countries, unleashing a flood of quantitative studies on the causes and consequences of corruption (Dimant,

2013; Treisman, 2007) and pushing corruption high atop government agendas throughout the world. Despite their popularity and use, however, these measures have attracted substantial debate and criticism (Andersson & Heywood, 2009; De Maria, 2008; Galtung, 2005; Kurer, 2005; Pellegata & Memoli, 2012; Razafindrakoto & Roubaud, 2010; Soreide, 2006). Though the most widely used measures are subjective based on the perceptions of corruption, they differ in terms of the subjects expressing their perceptions and the nature of the survey questions. The most widely used indicators both politically and in scholarly analyses (Andersson & Heywood, 2009), Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index and the Control of Corruption indicator from Governance Indicators of the World Bank group, draw on multiple surveys of business executives, and country and aid experts. TI's Global Corruption Barometer, like a number of other national polls, by contrast, gauges the publics' perceptions of corruption.¹ Precisely what these measures measure -- the essential validity question -- however, is not entirely clear and largely lost in forcing such a broad and multidimensional concept as corruption into a single indicator. "None of the indexes," as Rotberg (2017, p.54) notes, "is able effectively to control for the manner in which built-in attitudes may influence responses."

Table 1, comparing Mexico and the U.S. using TI data, shows Mexico with substantially higher levels of corruption than the U.S. This is not particularly surprising: a point I will return to later. The key point here, however, is that the calculations and spreads are hardly uniform. Data relying on expert/business views (the CPI) tends to show a much wider gap in the levels of corruption than data based on public opinion (GCB). Whereas 93% of Mexican respondents in the GCB classified corruption as a "serious problem" or "a problem," a substantial majority, 69%, of U.S. respondents did so. And while 87% of Mexicans polled classified their public officials as "corrupt" or "extremely corrupt," again more than a majority, 55% of U.S. respondents expressed this view. The distance on the CPI, a 48 point spread (26-74), is substantially greater than the spread in the other two (24 points and 32 points). Indeed, the CPI score for the US hardly seems to suggest that a majority of the people in the GCB would express the views they do. So just this cursory view tends to suggest that the U.S. public perceives a much higher rate of corruption than suggested by the experts, while experts and the Mexican public seem to be in somewhat closer accord. This trend is quite evident when we take into account other national polls tapping into the U.S. publics' views. In the 2012 American National Election Study (Bowler & Donovan, 2016, p.290), for example, 60% of respondents felt that "about half" or more "of the people running the government" were corrupt. In a 2013 Gallup poll, 79% of respondents in the U.S. agreed that corruption is "widespread throughout the government" (Clifton, 2014). Such views, again, suggest that in contrast to the expert view both the

Mexican and U.S. publics' tend to see their governments and politicians in a similar light. Further analysis of more specific questions in the public opinion surveys will help

crystalize the similarities in their viewpoints and a shared underlying corruption narrative.

Table 1
Corruption in Mexico and the U.S.

A) Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) 2016 Based on multiple polls of country experts and business leaders Scale = 0 (less clean or more corruption) to 100 (clean or less corruption) / Ranking among 176 countries		
	<u>CPI score / Ranking</u>	
Mexico	30 / 123 rd	least corrupt
U.S.	74 / 18 th	least corrupt
B) Transparency International's Global Corruption Barometer 2013 (national public surveys)		
1) "To what extent is corruption a problem in the public sector"		
	Mexico	U.S.
Serious problem	79%	38%
A problem	14%	31%
A slight problem	5%	23%
Not really a problem	1%	6%
Not a problem at all	1%	2%
2) Percentage of respondents who considered the following institution is corrupt/extremely corrupt		
	Mexico	U.S.
Public officials	87%	55%

This initial descriptive data raise questions centering largely on whether the four groups are actually referring to the same thing, and thus what the results may be telling us.² Why do expert and public perceptions seem to align in the case of Mexico, but not in the U.S.? The distance in the perceptions expressed by expert and public opinion in the U.S. certainly suggests that the two embrace different understandings about the meaning of corruption or may be applying different criteria, while agreement among expert and public opinion in Mexico suggests that these two groups might hold a shared understanding and criteria. But if that is the case, then why might such expert/public differences exist in one case, but not the other? Might it be possible that the experts in both cases share a certain understanding and approach that differ fundamentally from the two publics' views? And even despite their strikingly similar sentiments, are the Mexican and U.S.'s publics really referring to the same thing? In that none of these general perceptions specify the meaning of corruption or even the type of corruption, it is difficult to assert that they are all in fact referring to and hence measuring the same thing. As Tina Soreide (2006, 6) contends, it is "not clear to what extent the level of corruption reflects the frequency of corrupt acts, the damage done to society or the size of the bribes."

2. EXPERT OPINION IN MEXICO AND U.S.

Beginning with the expert views as expressed in the CPI, we see wide differences between the two countries. So what does the CPI measure and are those looking at Mexico and the U.S. truly employing the same meaning and understanding of corruption and thus applying

comparable criteria? To what extent do the results reflect true differences in the levels of corruption in the two countries and to what extent might those differences be shaped by the types of corruption or by the nature of the measures themselves?

A poll of polls composed of various questions with different phrasings from the general to the specific, many contend that the widely employed CPI tends to stress certain types of corruption while neglecting other types. As part of what many consider an orthodox approach, the CPI has been criticized as privileging individual forms of corruption, particularly bribery and governmental graft that impinge on the private sector, while neglecting favoritism, nepotism, conflict of interest, influence peddling, abuse of power, electoral fraud, vote buying, state capture, systemic and institutional forms of corruption, what many now refer to as "legal corruption" (Kaufmann & Vicente 2011), and other forms of corruption that do not involve financial transactions or impact the private sector (Andersson & Heywood 2009, p.749; De Maria, 2008; Dobel, 1978; Johnston, 1989; Soreide, 2006). Fredrik Galtung (2005, p.11) perhaps best captures this common critique when he claims that the CPI would more accurately be called a "bribe takers perception index" or an "extortion perceptions index." These more orthodox measures, in short, tend to reflect a rather narrow definition of corruption characterized as a form of individual behavior – rather than as a systemic phenomenon -- involving the violation of legal norms of public office or entrusted power for personal gain (Nye, 1967; Etzioni, 2014).

Within the contentious definitional debate, many acknowledge that defining corruption is more than simply an academic exercise; rather, it is a political/ideological

matter that rests in part on prevailing views of the proper use of political power: a discourse shaped in large part by those controlling the narrative (Johnston, 1996, 2004) or, to use Gramscian terms, those exercising hegemonic power (Carnoy, 1984). As a result, many contend that the views and conceptualization of corruption embedded in the CPI represent a narrative crafted by the international financial community, international business and western political leaders expressing an ideological bias that emphasizes the forms of corruption found in developing countries while downplaying the types of corruption found in developed countries (Bedirhanoglu, 2007; Brown & Cloke, 2004, 2011; Bukovansky, 2006; De Maria, 2008; Rocha, Brown, & Cloke, 2011; Sandoval-Ballesteros, 2013). This approach, it is argued, tends to stress a rather narrow definition of corruption rooted in a strict legal approach and focused primarily on the administrative side of the political equation; on what Warren (2004) refers to as the violation of “first order norms” (the laws and policies created by the public officials). This understanding of corruption, moreover, is “based upon an implicit understanding of ‘proper’ politics as being Western-style liberal democracies” (Andersson & Heywood, 2009, p.750) and thus tends to associate corruption with poor, developing and non-democratic countries (Galtung, 2005). Embedded within a neoliberal model that is inherently anti-state (Hall, 1999), this orthodox approach tends to see corruption as an institutional design problem (Philp, 2006, p.6) rooted in a Principal-Agent framework (Marquette & Peiffer, 2017). Treisman (2007) even notes how CPI could be uncovering experts’ suppositions or biases regarding the determinants of corruption. To be sure, critics characterize the view as a-historic, biased, contradictory and politicized, and as fulfilling an ideological and political function (Bedirhanoglu, 2007).

If we accept the notion that the two sets of international and business experts evaluating Mexico and the U.S. are basically in agreement regarding this approach -- and strong correlations have been found among the various surveys relying on expert opinion (Galtung, 2005; Heywood & Rose, 2014; Mauro, 1997) -- then the higher perception of corruption in Mexico may reflect the fact that Mexico, first, suffers the class of corruption emphasized in this narrative, and secondly, is almost automatically suspect or assumed to suffer high levels of corruption given its non-western developing status and weak democratic traditions and institutions. Similarly, the lower perception of corruption in the U.S. may reflect the fact that the country does not suffer the class of corruption emphasized in the narrative and, being a developed, democratic country, is assumed by experts

to suffer less corruption than other countries. In other words, if we accept these underlying tendencies, then the differences in levels of corruption between the two nations as reflected in the CPI arguably overstates the level of corruption in Mexico, while understating the level of corruption found in the U.S. As we will see from more detailed public opinion data, Mexico indeed ranks high in terms of routine forms of bribery and extortion within the major administrative units of the state: precisely the forms and meaning of corruption best captured by the CPI.

3. THE PUBLICS’ PERCEPTIONS

As noted, the publics’ perceptions of corruption in Mexico and the US are in much closer agreement than the views expressed by the experts (Table 1). This begs the question of what the two publics have in mind and whether they are in fact talking about the same thing. While both Mexicans and Americans may be incorporating in part the more “orthodox” type and meaning of corruption noted by the experts including widespread bribery, extortion, and graft, thus resulting in higher overall levels of corruption in Mexico than the US, there is ample evidence to suggest that their views also encompass a broader understanding of corruption and other forms.

Additional survey-based data from the public and empirical studies not only show closer agreement between the two publics, but also help provide a better sense of the types of and meaning of corruption reflected in the publics’ assessments. These include data on actual participation in corrupt acts, expectations of corruption, assessments of the provision of public goods, economic performance, and the quality of governmental institutions, political beliefs and exposure to the media, and trust (mistrust) in the government and others (Mocan, 2004; Morris & Klesner, 2010; Olkem, 2006; Rusciano, 2014; Smith, 2008; You & Khagram, 2005; Villoria et al., 2014, p.205; Wroe et al., 2015, p.2; Zhu et al., 2012). Public opinion data thus help us tease out the context of the publics’ views on corruption.

Despite the distinct political cultures, histories and institutions of the two nations, the views of the Mexican and US publics show some rather striking and surprising similarities, pointing to a common underlying narrative regarding corruption. Some similarities were highlighted in the earlier table looking at the level of corruption. Data in Table 2 goes further to compare the publics’ views of the perceived degree of corruption within specific institutional arenas, allowing for a comparison across institutions as well as a comparison of the relative ranking among the institutions within the two countries.

Table 2
Corruption by Area

Percentage of Respondents who felt these institutions were corrupt/extremely corrupt			
	Mexico/ Ranking	U.S./ Ranking	Difference / Ranking
Political parties	91% /1	76% /1	+15 (5)
Legislature	83% /4	61% /2	+22 (4)
Military	42% /11	30% /11	+12 (6)
NGOs	43% /7	30% /11	+13 (7)
Media	55% /6	58% /3	-3 (10)
Religious	43% /10	35% /9	+8 (9)
Business	51% /7	53% /5	-2 (11)
Education	43% /7	34% /10	+9 (8)
Judiciary	80% /5	42% /7	+38 (2)
Medical/health	42% /11	43% /6	-1 (12)
Police	90% /2	42% /7	+48 (1)
Public officials	87% /3	55% /4	+32 (3)
Avg.	62	47	

Source: Transparency International, Global Corruption Barometer 2013.

Consistent with earlier findings, we again see Mexicans sensing higher levels of corruption overall than their U.S. counterparts (avg. scores among the institutions listed is 62% for Mexico and 47% for the U.S.). Still, the distance in the average scores is only 15 percentage points with a near majority in the US considering the institutions to be corrupt. This gap, however, is not uniform and is much more pronounced in certain areas than in others. The largest differences can be seen in the two institutions of the justice system: the police and the judiciary, both located in the administrative/implementation side of the political system. This difference most likely incorporates widely distinct views on the perceived levels of corruption and impunity in the two countries and the relative strengths and weaknesses in the rule of law and state institutions, both of which are often tied inversely to corruption. In contrast to the institutions related to the rule of law, the extent of corruption is similar in other arenas. Most importantly, both publics consider political parties and the legislature to be highly corrupt. Also comparable are the areas of education, religious institutions, medical/health care, business, and the media, where U.S. respondents actually consider these institutions more corrupt than the Mexicans.

A second observation based on the GCB data compares the relative ranking across institutions within the two countries. This perspective partially controls for the impact of political culture. Here, both Mexican and U.S. respondents ranked political parties as the most corrupt institution and the legislature (the institution controlled by those parties) as the second most corrupt in the case of the U.S. and third most corrupt in the case of Mexico following the police. In other words, the publics' views of corruption are unquestionably shaped in large measure by their perceptions of corruption within the political parties and the legislatures (and areas largely beyond the scope of the opinion of experts in the CPI). This underscores a widely held perception of corruption among the public as significantly affecting the political/ representative or

input side of the equation. This suggests a more systemic interpretation of corruption relating largely to issues of representation and democratic inclusiveness as opposed to implementation and delivery of policy. Similar parallels here point to lower relative levels of corruption within the military (ranking 10th for both countries), and NGO's (ranking 7th on Mexico's scale and 10th on the U.S. scale). These relative rankings also point to large differences in the areas of police corruption, noted previously, ranked second most corrupt by Mexicans compared to its seventh place ranking by the U.S. public. While a major issue in Mexico, police corruption is also an extremely high profile, conspicuous form of corruption. Overall, this supports the notion that while both the Mexican and the U.S. publics may share a concern about certain sorts of political corruption as it relates to political representation, it is only in Mexico where a pattern of widespread bureaucratic corruption among the police and judicial system is also a major concern.

These patterns with respect to corruption are echoed in polls gauging the levels of confidence in key public institutions. Data from the World Values Survey (2010-2014), for instance, show low levels of confidence in parliament/congress and political parties in both countries and much wider differences with respect to the civil service, the courts and the police. Based on data from the WVS wave 6 (Mexico 2012, U.S. 2011), for instance, 73.8% of Mexican respondents compared to 76.7% of U.S. respondents expressed a lack of confidence ("not very much" or "none at all") in congress, while 76.9% (Mexico) versus 85.3% (U.S.) lacked confidence in political parties. Again, the parallels are clear. By contrast, whereas 77.6% of Mexicans had "not very much" or "none at all" confidence in the civil service, 52.4% of U.S. respondents felt this way. A great gap, but the US level of distrust is still striking. A similar gap in the levels of confidence can be seen with respect to the courts: 68.2% (Mexico) versus 42.1% (U.S.). A much larger difference can be seen with respect to the police. While only 28.4% of Mexican

respondents expressed confidence (“a great deal” and “quite a lot”) in the police, 68.3% of respondents in the U.S. did so.

A further indication that the two publics seem to be referring to the same thing when assessing corruption – corruption centered largely on the question of representation that sees both the parties and congress as corrupt – involves responses to the classical question of the extent to which the government is run by a few big entities acting on their own best interests or their own self-interest: arguably a question that taps into a much broader view or definition of corruption. As shown in Table 3, 64% of the U.S. public said the government in the U.S. was “entirely” or to a “large extent” run by a few big entities compared to just 62% among Mexican respondents. Looking at the flip side, 10% of US respondents said this occurred to “limited extent” or “not at all” compared to 13% of their Mexican counterparts. Here the gap in perceptions of corruption has largely disappeared.

Table 3
Extent the Government Run by a Few Big Entities Acting in Their Own Best Interests

	Mexico	U.S.
Entirely	26%	20%
Large extent	36%	44%
Somewhat	25%	27%
Limited extent	11%	8%
Not at all	2%	2%

Source: Transparency International, Global Corruption Barometer 2013.

While still relying on popular perceptions, a distinct approach to measuring corruption looks at actual participation in corrupt acts. Though participation influences perceptions, clearly (and universally) perceptions of corruption are much greater than actual experience with corruption (Morris, 2008; Razafindrakoto & Roubaud, 2010). This data helps develop further an understanding of the types of corruption found in each country. According to the discussion so far, Mexico not only suffers far more bureaucratic corruption than the US, but the public (and experts) acknowledge this pattern of corruption even though they also recognize and stress (in agreement with their US counterparts) forms of corruption related to representation and whether the government serves the public interest. Consequently, we would expect large differences in these measures. Indeed, as shown in Table 4, participation measures echo the point regarding different patterns of corruption in the two countries. Not only are Mexicans far more likely to have paid a bribe in the past 12 months than their U.S. counterparts (the “democratization of corruption” in Mexico?), but the particularly high levels of participation in Mexico relating to the police and the judiciary reaffirm the findings noted earlier that ranked these institutions as second and fourth

most corrupt within the country with correspondingly low levels of confidence. This again points to a crucial difference between the two nations in terms of the types of corruption the countries face and a difference that contributes to differences in the perceptions of corruption by both the public and the experts.

Table 4
Participation in Corruption (public)

Anyone in household paid a bribe to one of 8 services in last 12 months		
	Mexico	U.S.
Police	61%	7%
Judiciary	55%	15%
Land services	31%	17%
Registry/Permit	27%	14%
Education services	17%	11%
Utilities	17%	6%
Tax revenue	16%	9%
Medical services	10%	6%

Source: Transparency International, Global Corruption Barometer 2013.

In closing out the comparison between the publics, focus turns briefly to the publics’ perceptions of change, assessment of governments’ efforts to fight corruption, and views on political efficacy. Once again, the data from the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer show the two publics largely think alike. Though Mexicans exhibit a somewhat more critical viewpoint, both publics point to an increase in corruption over the past two years. Whereas 71% of Mexicans believed corruption had increased, 60% of U.S. respondents thought so. Viewed from the opposite angle the similarities are even more striking with 8% of Mexican compared to just 10% of U.S. respondents sensing any decline in corruption over that period. Similarly, when asked how effective the government’s actions are in fighting corruption, the differences between the two countries once again seem comparable with sizable majorities -- 73% of Mexicans versus 59% of U.S. respondents – grading the governments’ actions as ineffective. Once again, the other end of that scale points to only 11% of Mexicans compared to just 19% of U.S. respondents deeming the governments’ efforts effective. The differences wane even further when looking at the publics’ perspective on the imagined role or efficacy of the public in terms of fighting corruption. Here, only 5 percentage points separate the proportions of Mexicans agreeing or strongly agreeing (81% versus 76%) that ordinary people can make a difference in the fight against corruption compared to their U.S. counterparts. In short whatever form of corruption the public perceives to exist within the two countries, the public tends to discount the government’s efforts to fight it and see the people’s role as critical. This finding takes on even greater significance given the broader differences in the narratives regarding the natures of the two political systems: democratic, strong rule of law and institutions on the one hand versus

weak democratic/authoritarian, weak rule of law and weak institutions on the other.

4. EXPERTS VERSUS PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

The final issue centers on whether the views of the experts really differ from those held by the public? At a preliminary level, it should be noted that the tendencies in the data presented earlier are clearly in the same direction. In other words, Mexico suffers higher levels of corruption according to both experts and the public, even though the views of the Mexican and U.S. publics align quite closely in many polls depending on the nature of the survey question.

5. EXPERT V US PUBLIC

Perhaps the most noteworthy gap here separates expert and public opinion in the U.S. The distance between the two views makes it hard to argue that they are looking at or evaluating the same thing. According to the CPI, corruption is at best a minor issue in the U.S., while for the public it is a major issue. As Shaun Bowler and Todd Donovan (2016, p.273) note “many Americans would seem to have a different sense of corruption” than implied by standard definitions. If the meaning of corruption underlying expert views discussed earlier centers on a narrow, legal-based definition emphasizing bribery in the public administration, the question then is what meanings and forms of corruption does the public employ? If the public considers the government corrupt, what does that mean exactly, especially since the experts have a different take on it?

The more detailed public opinion data reviewed here helps underscore the public’s focus. As noted, the U.S. public clearly considers political parties and congress to be the most corrupt institutions in the country. In fact, 76% of respondents considered political parties either “corrupt” or “extremely corrupt,” while 61% held this view of the legislature, ranking these as the first and second most corrupt among the many institutions in the survey (see Table 2 earlier). In response to a rather straightforward query in a 2016 Economist/ YouGov poll, “Do you think the Democratic/Republican party is corrupt?” 51% of Democrats and 62% of Republicans said yes (Frankovic, 2016). This institutional arena, in short, tends to be the primary locus of a lot of corruption in the public’s eye.

Given the role of parties and legislature in theoretically representing the people on the front end of the political system it is not surprising then that underlying these sentiments lie deeper notions by the public that the government fails to represent their interests and instead tends to represent the interests of a few big entities acting in their own best interest. To reiterate the data in Table 3 earlier, 64% of the U.S. public said the government in

the U.S. was “entirely” or to a “large extent” run by a few big entities with only 10% of respondents saying this occurred to “limited extent” or “not at all.” Indeed, large numbers consider members of Congress beholden to those financing their electoral campaigns (Bowler & Donovan, 2016, p.276). In a 2012 poll conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, for instance, 77% agreed that members of Congress are more likely to act in the interest of a group that spent millions to elect them than to act in the public interest (Brennan Center for Justice, n.d.). In a December 2013 YouGov poll, 53% felt the government provides more to help the rich than the poor (19%) or the middle class (8%): the preferred answer across gender, age, party ID, voter registration, race, education and region. In a 2010 poll, 85% of respondents felt that corporations have too much influence, while 93% said average citizens have too little (Nichols & McChesney, 2013, p.84; see also Hart Research Associates, 2010). In another study (Blas et al., 2012), 29% said politicians vote to please their contributors “all the time” with another 41% saying they do so “often,” with only 18% selecting “sometimes” or “never.” In the same study, on 0-10 scale rating the level of influence on members of congress, big companies and lobbyists both rated 8.16, followed by the wealthy at 8.02, and PACs at 7.98 with the average voter ranked last with a score of 2.82 (Gilens, 2012; Gilens & Page, 2014). Indeed, as Justice Stephen Breyer of the U.S. Supreme Court noted in his dissent in the case of *McCutcheon v. FEC* (2003), “Where enough money calls the tune, the general public will not be heard” (Dickerson, 2013, p.109). Such influence seemingly extends beyond the legislature into the judiciary. A Justice at Stake survey in 2011 found 76% of respondents expressing the view that campaign contributions have at least some impact on judges’ decisions (Nichols & McChesney, 2013, p.59). Such a narrative, in turn, informs an underlying lack of trust in the system among the people. Indeed, data from the U.S. American National Election Studies shows as many as 75% of respondents trusting the government only “some of the time” or “never” (Pew Research Center, 2014a; for historic data on trust see Pew Research Center, 2014b; see also Johnston, 2012).

In contrast to the understanding of corruption depicted by experts, the U.S. public, at one level, seems to be training much of its attention on the political side of the equation – political parties, legislatures, etc. -- rather than on the output side of government which it seems to acknowledge as being less corrupt. This class of corruption encompasses campaign contributions, lobbying, revolving door politics, state capture, gerrymandering, etc. In doing so, the public seems to be reflecting a broader, more systemic approach or understanding of corruption that stresses the extent to which the government actually violates the norm represented by the public interest not only for private (avarice) gain, but more importantly, for political, partisan and/or group/class gain. So whereas

expert views might incorporate a narrower definition centered on the abuse of legal authority for private gain, exemplified by bribery in the administrative units of the state, the U.S. publics' view seems to incorporate a much broader definition that includes the illegal as well as the legal yet unethical use of public power and resources for private and/or political gain (Etzioni, 2014). This broader narrative incorporates definitions of corruption as a form of exclusion (Rusciano, 2014, p.42; Warren, 2006, p.804), as the impartial implementation of government policies (Rothstein, 2011), and as institutional and systemic (Thompson, 2013), encompassing various forms of "legal corruption" (Bowler & Donovan, 2016, p.274; Kaufmann & Vicente, p.2011) (see also Dincer & Johnston, 2014; Funderburk, 2012; Lessig, 2011, 2013; Mendilow, 2016; Selds, 2014) or as a structural phenomenon centering on power domination (Sandoval, 2013). The notion that experts' understanding of corruption encompasses a more restricted, legalistic interpretation in contrast to a broader definition held by the public finds empirical support in the work of Redlawsk and McCann's (2005) on the U.S., McAllister (2000) on Australia, Allen and Birch (2012) on the U.K., and Atkinson and Bierling (2005) on Canada. Rusciano's (2014) cross-national study of corruption similarly finds the public tends to see corruption as a form of exclusion and disempowerment leading to perceived inefficiencies: "the more empowered citizens are, the less corrupt they perceive their nation to be" (p. 42).

6. EXPERT AND PUBLIC OPINION IN MEXICO

Turning finally to expert and public opinion in Mexico, the high levels of agreement between the two sets of observers – both see high levels of corruption -- may suggest that they are relying on a common approach and understanding of corruption rather than different ones as seen in the U.S. And yet, the public's agreement with the U.S. public seems to suggest a view distinct from the experts. If expert views parallel the expert views used in the US and yet the US public adopts a different approach, then is the Mexican public adopting a view more similar to the experts or one more in parallel to the US public?

Clearly, as reflected in the polls cited here and numerous national polls taken over the years in Mexico (Transparencia Mexicana, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, & 2010) both the experts and the Mexican public perceive extremely high levels of corruption in the country. No one really questions that assertion. Arguably, if both the Mexican and US publics' views incorporate the types and meaning of corruption reflected in expert opinion (the minimalist view), but also the broader understanding of corruption and the types of corruption associated with the broader understanding of the concept tied to issues of representation, then Mexicans views could conceivably parallel both the experts approach and the approach of the

US public. In other words, like the experts, the Mexican public recognizes and acknowledges the high levels of illegal forms of mainly administrative forms of corruption, particularly among the police and the bureaucracy. But in addition to that, the Mexican public also, like its US counterparts, envisions widespread corruption within the parties and the legislature, seeing the government as failing to represent and serve the peoples' interests.

Thus, according to the GCB 2013, 90% of the Mexican public considers the police "corrupt/extremely corrupt," with 87% considering public officials, and 80% the judiciary as corrupt. This view informs the high level of agreement between experts and the public. But at the same time, like in the U.S., 91% of the Mexican respondents considered political parties "corrupt" or "extremely corrupt" – deemed the most corrupt institution as seen in the U.S. – and 83% feeling this way about the legislature. Reflecting a broader definition or approach to corruption, the views of the Mexican public parallel US views regarding the extent to which the government is run by a few entities acting in their own best interests with 62% (compared to 64% in the U.S.) responding "entirely" or "to a large extent" to that question. National polls tend to sustain this view with large majorities either strongly agreeing or agreeing that public officials are unconcerned about people like themselves (75%), and that when laws are made the politicians take into account either the interests of the political party or their own personal interests rather than those of the people (67%) (ENCUP). Such views, as noted with respect to the US public, reflect a much broader understanding of the concept of corruption that stresses the lack of representation; the view that those in the government are pursuing their own interests at the neglect of the public interest. In sum, the Mexican public seems to employ a multi-dimensional view encompassing both the forms of corruption often associated with corruption (from a narrow legal perspective) as well as broader understanding of corruption that relates to representation and inclusiveness.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Table 5 seeks to pull together and summarize the findings of the analysis. It shows differences and similarities among the pairs of observers in terms of the suggested types of corruption taken into account when expressing their opinions, the underlying meaning and understanding of the concept, as well as the empirical differences. Perhaps the most important gap here centers on the publics' perceptions rooted in a broader understanding of corruption that concentrates heavily on the political dimension and encompasses "legal" forms of corruption versus the experts' perceptions depicting a narrower understanding of corruption that loads strongly on the administrative/ bureaucratic dimension in the delivery of government services and illegal forms of corruption.

Table 5
Summary of Differences/Similarities Among the Groups

Paired Actors	Focus	Definitions/Meanings	Comparative Measures
Experts on Mexico and US	Both focus on more illegal forms of corruption	Narrow view related to legal criteria and Weberian bureaucracy	Mexico with substantially higher levels of corruption than the US.
Publics in Mexico and US	Both tend to focus on representation and government pursuit of the public interest, encompassing “legal” forms of systemic corruption.	Broader definition related to pursuit of public interest, exclusion, and disempowerment, though the Mexican public recognizes multiple layers and meanings of corruption and also incorporates corruption in the administrative/bureaucratic context.	Slightly higher levels of corruption in Mexico in terms of participation and within key administrative sectors, but views tend to coalesce and see high levels of political corruption within the parties and legislatures, the failure of the government to act, and increases in corruption in recent years. Both see high levels of corruption.
Experts v. Public			
-- in Mexico	Both recognize the widespread prevalence of more illegal forms of corruption within the administrative/ bureaucratic side; however, the public’s views also emphasize corruption among the parties and in congress, focusing on representation.	Whereas the two agree on a narrow definition of corruption, the public also recognizes the multiple layers and meanings of corruption, suggesting a broader definition.	Empirical agreement pointing to high levels of corruption in Mexico.
-- in U.S.	Substantial disagreement. Whereas experts tend to focus more on illegal forms of corruption within the administrative/ bureaucratic side (which both see as relatively low), the public also tends to focus more on representation and government pursuit of the public interest, perceives corruption within the campaign finance system, lobbying, the revolving door, etc. and hence “legal” forms of corruption.	The experts employ a narrower definition centered on the law and administrative/ bureaucratic corruption, while the public embraces a broader idea of corruption that includes “legal” forms of corruption and relates to representation, the pursuit of the public interest, exclusion and disempowerment.	Large empirical gaps between the two with the public sensing much higher levels of corruption than the experts.

More importantly, the analysis here highlights the multidimensionality of corruption, its multiple forms, and even the ideological and political underpinnings of how we talk about, describe and measure corruption. The analysis shows that while Mexico is generally considered to suffer higher levels of corruption than the U.S., the gaps between the two nations are less pronounced when based on public opinion as opposed to expert opinion, when employing broader interpretations or meanings of corruption, and when focusing on specific institutional arenas. Mexico clearly sports more “petty corruption” involving bribes and extortion vis-à-vis the police and the judiciary than the U.S. And yet, both publics tend to see their political parties, legislatures, and public officials as largely corrupt, suggesting a more intense focus on more systemic forms of corruption -- state capture, duplicitous exclusion and “legal” forms of corruption. The perception in both countries then is of high levels of corruption on the input side of the equation where corruption is more commonly seen from a systemic rather than an individualistic perspective. Consistent with Thompson’s (2013) notion of institutional corruption, the people seem to see many of their institutions operating in ways contrary to their stated democratic purpose with leaders abusing their power for their own personal or political gain.

Rhetorically, I suppose, one can ask: “whose perspective is closer to the truth?” The problem, of course, is that our rather rudimentary measures of corruption make it impossible to address such a question since we cannot discern or measure “the truth.” After all, both views are proxy measures based on perceptions, not reality, thereby altering the query slightly to: “whose views should we trust to more adequately reflect reality?” Though perhaps an argument can be made that experts are more likely to agree on what corruption means and may even have a better understanding of the level and degree of corruption than the more impressionistic views of the public and/or that the people’s perceptions are more likely to be biased and skewed, incorporating something far more than actual “corruption” (Olkem 2006) -- indeed, as Atkinson and Bierling (2005, 1010) suggest, politicians see the public as naïve about the requirements of politics -- such a response may unduly privilege a certain conceptualization of corruption and a methodological approach both of which may be equally biased, restrictive, and ideological. After all, contrary to Lord Acton’s strikingly famous axiom, absolute power does not tend to corrupt absolutely if it includes the power to define corruption or our approach to understanding it.

A more effective approach is to take these views together, incorporating them into a multidimensional understanding of this amorphous term “corruption,” thus acknowledging the concept’s contested and discursive nature. As Yue and Peters (2015, p.446) point out, corruption is “a phenomenon that is in a constant state of becoming.” Even where, as in the U.S., experts may point to minimal levels of corruption, politically the public’s views can hardly be dismissed, particularly given the democratic meta-narrative that the government should serve the interests of the people and the perceived role such a perception may have in shaping political participation and popular demands. If indeed corruption is defined by what the public considers it to be, then by definition their views should carry substantial weight. Even so, what determines the distance between perception and reality, or the gap between actual corruption and the appearance of corruption to use the terms noted in the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976), remains an empirical question.

The publics’ views in both countries also suggest that the hegemonic narrative on corruption led by the experts remains politically contested. Based on a broader understanding of corruption, this counter-hegemonic discourse, likely a result of growing income inequality and heightened polarization in both countries, plays a major role in shaping political and social movements, and influencing demands and assessments of government and society. These views arguably lay behind the support enjoyed by Donald Trump and even Bernie Sanders, two outsiders critical of the system and critics of the corruption. Trump, indeed, campaigned on the notion that the system is corrupt. Similarly such views fueled the campaign, popularity and the stunning victory of Andrés Manuel López Obrador and his MORENA party in the July 2018 election in Mexico.

The analysis also raises a number of theoretical issues. Despite the explosive growth in scholarly and popular attention to corruption over the past few decades, there remains a serious mismatch between conceptualizations and typologies of corruption on the one hand, and how corruption is measured, on the other. This incongruence fuels confusion (Heywood 2015). As indicated from the discussion here, corruption is an incredibly broad and ambiguous concept with multiple meanings that assumes many forms (i.e. bribery, embezzlement, graft, fraud, abuse of power, obstruction of justice, nepotism, influence peddling). Such breadth has nurtured an intense debate in the literature over definition (Philip 1997, p.2015; Etzioni, 2014). Sadly, as Jonathan Mendilow and Ilan Peleg (2014, p.1) point out,

Students of corruption have used the term in so many contexts and with such versatility that it lost much of its theoretical and practical significance, while in colloquial speech the negative connotations frequently turned it into little more than a term of disparagement against disliked governments or individual officials.

Denis Thompson (2013, p.15) echoes the point:

We need to move beyond the focus on individual corruption that has preoccupied social scientists, political reformers, and ethics committees, and attend to the institutional corruption they have neglected. We have to turn from the stark land of bribery, extortion, and simple personal gain and enter into the shadowy world of implicit understandings, ambiguous favors, and political advantage.

Beyond conceptualization and measurement, the results also show once again that not all forms of corruption go together (Johnston, 2005). When viewed from a broader context in which Mexico suffers not only higher levels of corruption, but also arguably greater “abuses of power” (corruption) in the form of a weak rule of law, impunity, human rights abuses, electoral fraud, etc. than the U.S., it is intriguing how so many of the interpretations of corruption by the two publics in terms of the failures of other aspects of democracy seem to align. In other words, despite the perceived differences in so many other arenas, the two publics share the belief that their governments are corrupt and becoming more so, despite those other differences. This clearly points to the need to disaggregate our exploration of corruption to highlight distinct causes, consequences and dynamics. But underlying these views lie different political narratives regarding the nature of power, the state and society. Both Mexicans and U.S. citizens have learned to expect corruption in different contexts, and distrust their political leaders; yet their anti-state/ anti-government narratives differ and have different historical roots. How do these components of the political culture influence the peoples’ understanding of corruption, their expectations, and their interactions with the state? And what might those differences and similarities teach us about the nature of corruption both as a deviant form of behavior, as a systemic phenomenon, and as a contested and constructed concept?

ENDNOTES

¹The CPI and the CC index are compiled from multiple surveys to produce a single measure per country, TI’s 2014 CPI included 12 data sources and roughly 50 variables or questions ranging from “In your country, how common is diversion of public funds to companies, individuals or groups due to corruption?” to “Do whistleblowers, anti-corruption activists, investigators, and journalists enjoy legal protections that make them feel secure about reporting cases of bribery and corruption?” Some questions broadly relate to the “political system” while others specifically ask about the extent of corruption within specific institutions like the customs office or city government. Though considered expert opinion, one of the 12 sources in TI’s CPI, World Justice Project Rule of Law survey, includes responses from experts and the general population. The WB’s Control of Corruption lists six

representative sources gauging 15 variables, and 16 non-representative sources reporting on another 29 variables. The wide range of variables includes the public's trust in politicians, diversion of public funds, irregular payments in various areas, state capture, level of "petty" corruption, the intrusiveness of the country's bureaucracy, the extent of "red tape," transparency, the prosecution of office abuse, etc. Unlike the CPI and the CC, TI's Global Corruption Barometer provides more than one measure, differentiating the levels of corruption by governmental institutions as discussed below. Even so, as with the many questions used to compile the expert measures, these still fail to grapple with what constitutes corruption or what respondents mean by corruption when responding. Some studies have sought to compare different forms of corruption that are arguably rooted in competing definitions, though these distinctions are often entirely subjective. Studies by Heidenheimer (1970), Jackson and Smith (1996), McAllister (2000), Atkinson and Bierling (2005) and Walton (2015), for instance, identify differences along a scale of the perceived seriousness or "corruptness" of different corrupt or unethical acts, while Kaufmann and Vincent (2011) and Dincer and Johnston (2014) differentiate and examine legal versus illegal corruption.

²Some studies find a correlation linking the expert-based surveys and public opinion surveys (see Canache and Allison 2005; Razafindrakoto and Roubaud 2010). A study of Latin American countries, for example, finds the strongest statistically significant correlation linking the CPI to the GCB to the question relating to corruption among the police at $r = -.64$ (Stanfill et al., 2016). Other studies, however, point to the differences between the two. Looking at surveys of public and experts in eight African countries on participation in corruption, Razafindrakoto and Roubaud (2010) find that experts overestimate and produce views distinct from the public, suggesting ideological bias on the part of the experts. Focusing on European countries, Pellegata and Memoli (2012, p.9) similarly conclude that there are differences in the ways citizens and experts evaluate corruption.

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